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Review of Creating the Customer-Driven Academic Library by Jeannette Woodward

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CREATING THE CUSTOMER-DRIVEN ACADEMIC LIBRARY. Woodward, Jeannette. Chicago, IL. American Library Association, 2009. 194 pp. \$58.00. ISBN: 978-0-8389-0976-8.

Are you a leader? This call to “step up” and re-think customer service may be hard to hear, but in her latest book, Jeannette Woodward argues that to have a successful academic library, an increase in staff visibility and allowing students to be “more active participants in the library’s future”—in short, a customer-driven rather than merely collection-driven library—will bring success. While based on an academic institution, the basic principles carry over to any type of library.

Online journals and resources have changed how customers use the library and impacts academic libraries more than other types of libraries. Because of computers, automated systems and paraprofessionals, many librarians are hidden away in their offices or in technical services areas out of the public eye. Especially in a world driven by electronic resources, however, libraries must hire people who like people and want to be with them. As Ms. Woodward wonders, “Why do we hire people who do not enjoy working with the public?” For librarians to stay connected they must have relationships with and offer personalized service to customers who value the “spark of human kinship.” It is up to innovators to redesign or renovate their libraries to welcome these customers.

Recent webinars and library journal articles talk about doing away with the traditional reference desk in favor of “on call” reference or letting paraprofessionals or the circulation desk handle questions. This author bucks that trend and argues the opposite, suggesting that librarians are missing in action and should not only be back on the desk but should be on every floor of the library. Upsize, not downsize the reference desk and make the library space “livable” for customers are the main messages in this ALA Editions publication.

To research the book, the author interviewed librarians and students at numerous differently-sized libraries. Her analysis has been based on an average medium-size academic library and her new hypothetical library runs like a clock. Ms. Woodward’s emphasis on people, the *right* people, may bruise some egos. She believes that the quest for academic status and/or faculty recognition has taken librarians away from public service and leadership goals and she is deeply concerned that librarians have made a false distinction between being at the front reference desk and “real” work. Her support and respect of librarians is evident, however, since she doesn’t want to shift work to non-professionals or blame from administrators. These managers are at fault for not providing leadership training and not putting librarians in key roles in their institutions.

The author believes that customer service has become a “frill.” She notes that politeness isn’t the same thing as customer service. Currently, computers or paraprofessionals do many library tasks but there is still an obligation to customer service; face-to-face assistance from warm and helpful people is what will return customers to the library, regardless of type of library. In

writing this book she wants to get librarians out from their offices and put them at desks out in the public area, while allowing that working the public service desk can be “extremely tiring for introverts.” She then moves her librarian from her hypothetical library out from behind the reference desk to a small desk in the middle of the public area between “study tables and book stacks,” making this hypothetical librarian hypothetically, “...happier than she ever was... .”

Yet, Ms. Woodward has many excellent suggestions for how academic libraries can be “livable” without sacrificing their scholarly priorities. Students shouldn’t need to be concerned about the beige, ugly architecture of a library as long as there is wireless connectivity and lots of outlets. The chapter called “Making the Transition to a Twenty-First-Century Library” is filled with ideas and opportunities. Of note is the concept that a one-sized library doesn’t fit all. Seating and computer accommodations should offer a variety of styles and sizes and accommodate evening and weekend students. The library should have a place for food and drink and be aware of the needs and anxieties of non-traditional students. Additionally, library-centric eccentricities may stymie users. Simple things like improving signage, atmosphere, and finding the “invisible staff” will draw in students and faculty who think the library is just a “warehouse” for books. These ideas hold especially true for a hospital library where patients, families and care givers are already dealing with a challenging environment. Other suggestions include using IM and texting, digital reference, and embedding librarians in online courses and in person in the departments they serve. In her ideal world, the library space and the librarians are still the draw, not the virtual resources. She states that if a redesign project fails it is probably because the customer wasn’t consulted in the design.

Woodward demands that library directors focus on the needs of the library, not the librarians, saying that change must come whether or not librarians want to work weekend and evening hours. She agrees that people don’t like change but states, “If it’s a matter of personal preference standing in the way of quality library service, you’re doing your customers a grave disservice.” Make way for the new – people included.

There are additional resources on the book’s ALA website including a checklist that can be used to assess one’s own library, called, “*An Outsider’s View: A Tour of the Public Spaces in the Academic Library*”. Tough to take, but with many valuable ideas, “*Creating the Customer-Driven Academic Library*,” is full of moxie and a deep commitment to libraries and the customers they serve and is highly recommended. Medical Academic Librarians will be challenged by her ideas and might do well to take some of her suggestions to heart.